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ABSTRACT

This essay discusses the possibilities and the problems that may be encountered in the future. Human life on this planet is at a critical stage. Social, economic, and technological developments have brought man to a point at which a total transformation of our ways of thinking and acting are necessary if the world is to avoid catastrophic destruction either by nuclear war, the failure of the ecological balance, or socioeconomic disaster. Educators have a responsibility to participate in preparing students for the needed transition, and have unique opportunities to do so. (PGD)

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The Future of Global Society

by

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The leaders of the first half of the 21st Century are now in school. Potentially within reach of the newborn are 2100 A.D., and a view of the 22nd Century. The transition of society from the last quarter of the 20th Century to the next one hundred years and beyond has been of increasing concern. Humans have never before been blessed with as many resources at their disposal, but for all the economic wealth, educated people, sophisticated technology, and scientific knowledge, the future is not being addressed very effectively.

Social and economic costs of tapping into the finiteness of world resources, the pressures for redistribution of income and wealth, and the diminishing role of force as an instrument for effecting change are factors which are transforming global conditions. Serious doubts have been raised as to whether nations, institutions, and individuals can make major societal transitions without world catastrophes.

Humans have always faced disaster due to both natural circumstances beyond control (earthquakes), and those self-made (war). But now global survival may depend upon the ability of society to undergo major transformation in a limited period of time. This transformation involves individual perceptions, cognitive capabilities, and political processes. The basic change between times today and the problems of the yesterdays is that the principal hazards that humans now face are largely of their own making and largely within their control.

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Futurists indicate that the world must eliminate ancient quarrels, create global partnerships, reduce the arms race, care for the human environment, and curb the population explosion before these factors are beyond control; failure to achieve this could create a situation in which survival would be uncertain.

Many students of the future claim that this is an extraordinary moment in time -- a period greater than the Copernician Revolution and the Reformation; the final result will be more profound than when humans shifted from hunting and gathering to an agricultural society, and later to an industrial society. There have been similar transitions in history, but the failure now to deal with crisis could destroy the earth through quick nuclear/biological holocaust or slow cultural degradation. The pace of change is so great that a complete transition is essential within the current generation.

The world appears to be in an historically critical state. Great problems have been created for the universe in many respects. Survival may depend upon learning to live in a very different way. The pollution of resources is an illustration, yet what more critical societal needs are there than air, water, and food, and the total preservation of the biosphere.

The coming generations continue to face encounters with famine, war, and life-threats to the capacity of the globe. The long-term solution may require the abandonment of lethal techniques, the competitive ways of life, and the current mentality of the industrial civilization. The near term outlook is for change forced by catastrophic external events rather than by preferable choice. Meeting challenges of the future may be at the payment of an extremely high price.

The world may be headed for the most fateful period in history. Industrialized society may be on the verge of a more wrenching period of change than any

previous period, as a result of the rapidity, extensiveness, and depth of which the cultural bases will be affected. Inflation and unemployment, energy and environment conflicts, world poverty, alienation, and the emergence of different values are all indications that the society is becoming unworkable.

In spite of the problems, there are a number of very positive signs ahead. The next century can solve the eternal problems of human poverty, pollution, resource depletion, food and energy shortages. technological excesses, gaps between rich and poor nations, and the deterioration of the quality of life. Though expanding production can absorb only a limited number of the exploding population, the optimists believe that there will be sufficient growth in occupations considered service and knowledge-based industries to provide work for all. Technology can bring social problems under control. Societal change can occur without causing major disruption. Humans still have choice.

Regardless of viewpoint, critical decisions must be made in the very near future. The concepts of schooling and basic education are being challenged by life support realities. Potential nuclear annihilation is but one of the sixty-four or more dilemmas facing humankind. A holocaust involving multiple explosions would assail individual life, human society, and the total environment of Planet Earth. Yet according to a segment of futurist thinking, society seems to continue to deny the existence of such threats; people appear to be preparing for self-destruction. They do not yet seem willing to accept the possibility of nuclear extinction.

A real revolution in thought and action is needed if humans are to avoid nuclear war. Utopian thinking is an essential quantum overleap. Massive use of these weapons of extermination would lead to the probable extinction of the majority of humankind. The fate of the earth does appear to lie in the balance.

School test score controversies seem pale in comparison to priority global curriculum concerns. Fortunately there are active groups of people who are countering the nuclear buildup. There appears to be no way to prepare for nuclear war--or survive an all out attack; the only possibility is to prevent it.

In many ways more menacing than megaton bombs is the frightening and growing have/have-not gap between the affluent and non-affluent peoples and nations. The gap must be reversed and narrowed. The question of whether to assist the starving individuals of the world has forced humans to the brink of another very difficult and decisive societal perspective--again causing people to address the very basic questions of human survival.

People may not make it on the planet unless more care is given to the vulnerable reserves of air, water, and soil. The world society cannot be maintained forever if half the people are fortunate and half miserable; half free, half slaves; half confident, half in despair. Certainly school curriculum design needs to go beyond good writing skills.

The ecological conditions of the planet add to the concern, realizing that the continued destruction of the life support systems could lead to social chaos and human disaster. The polluted rivers and seas, rapidly becoming the sewers of the world, threaten all humans. The oceans are a key to life support. The long years trying to reach agreement at the Law of the Sea conferences illustrate the continuing struggle between and among the giant private world corporations, the powerful developed ocean countries, and the poverty stricken, landlocked, Third World political entities. Why was it so difficult to find solutions for sharing with all humankind the fantastic life supporting potentials of the oceans?

The ocean mineral wealth is great from the nodules of manganese, and from

the deposits of such valuable assets as iron, nickel, copper, and cobalt. There is additional oil to be produced. Energy sources are there to be developed through ocean thermal energy conversion. More accurate long-range weather forecasts are possible through charting changes in temperature at great depth. The military aspects, to enhance peace or have an advantage in war , are a further concern. Living beneath the sea is becoming more of a normal possibility through new undersea habitat developments.

However, if the oceans should die, it could signal an end to most life on earth--marine, animals, plants, and humans. There is no way people can survive without the oxygen and other benefits from the water surfaces. Enormous climate changes, melting of the polar caps, stench, decay, flight to the highlands, and cesspools which cease absorbing CO_2 could result from marine destruction.

It is estimated that at least half the population of the world, over two billion people, only have access to unsafe water. Ecologists are now writing that a poisoned river is any river that flows. The coral reefs of the world are being destroyed by human greed looking for souvenirs and trinkets. The whales and dolphins are being slaughtered for tragic short-term personal profits. The seals are rapidly being killed; only one-fourth of the seal population of the world remains. The sea otters are being eliminated; the valuable and essential ocean kelp is being destroyed. The bounty of the sea provided by nature is being reduced; the annual tonnage has been decreasing since 1971. As a result of the world population increase, the per capita fish catch is declining, while prices rise.

Considering population, resources, and environmental conditions from a long range, global perspective, the assessment of the world in the year 2000 is basically pessimistic. It could be fantastically optimistic, if there is a major shift in values, priorities, and lifestyles.

National and international security is as endangered by the probable severe degradations of the ecological systems, as it is by threats of war. It is anticipated that rising world populations--particularly in lesser developed countries--will be a major cause of the problems facing the world at the turn of the century. Ninety percent of the new population will inhabit underdeveloped countries whose economies and land can least afford to support them. Perhaps more dramatic is that 80 percent of the people of the globe will be living in underdeveloped nations, many of these being crammed into over-crowded urban areas. Building to house these people will reduce fertile soils; the remaining land base will be further denuded of vegetation, stripped of organic matter, and exposed to negative elements of nature. The world may lose one-third of its agricultural lands to desertification by the year 2000, a result of human mismanagement often caused by pressure from increased population.

There are numerous other concerns related to life support systems. Insect varieties have become immune to chemicals, leading to the possibility of swarms of insects becoming commonplace. Forests covered one-fourth of the world in 1960, but by the year 2000 may cover only one-sixth; prices and scarcity may put fuel wood and charcoal out of reach. Shortages of fresh water can be expected to appear with increasing frequency and severity. The capacity of oil producing nations to provide a surplus should disappear, leading to skyrocketing oil prices.

These problems have an interdedependent effect on the future. Depleted supplies of food, water, and reproductive farmland in the lesser-developed countries, brought about by overpopulation, may create a sharp division between the affluent and those who have little or nothing. The deprived areas of the globe could become breeding grounds for revolutions and wars against wealthy nations.

The growing world population is threatening the survival of thousands of plant and animal species. By the end of the 20th Century, some researchers believe over 1,000,000 species may become extinct. Many can be saved, if effective action is taken to halt the rapid deterioration of the natural environment. Over 1,000 birds and mammals are now in jeopardy. Perhaps even more serious is the anticipated potential extinction of 20,000 to 30,000 plants. The rain forests may be extinct before the year 2000. Ironically the problems are most acute in the poverty areas of the Third World countries, where people are clutching at everything in an effort to survive.

The future shape of the biosphere will depend in good measure on the political and economic policies affecting employment, land tenure, income distribution, and population growth. The implications for concerned educators are staggering. The overhauling of the curriculum alone is monumental, but tied to the struggle over values and what constitutes basic competencies presents immense political problems. More important, though, is searching for commitment to determine how education can enhance the emergence of people who will take action now at their student level on a small, individualized scale, and who later as group leaders will work toward judgments which may avert disaster.

Many of the problems appear solvable, sometimes through technology, more often through the plentiful resource of human labor, utilized in a humane way; the key is to overcome the seemingly insurmountable institutional and political barriers. The solutions may rest with the resettlement of humans, significant changes in lifestyles, substantial redirection of corporate policies, and a high degree of cooperation among nations.

Ecological stresses can quickly become economic stresses. The effort to develop new crop land has led to an overall fall in the per acre yield. Returns on the heavy use of fertilizer are declining. However, crop production is in better shape than the fisheries, forests, and grasslands. The new finds in

oil are faced with the problem of overall diminishing returns, as are the developments in the mining industries, and the limits of the capacity of the earth to absorb waste. The increasing prices of such items as oil, commodities, soybeans, lumber, and paper add to the dilemmas.

Land and housing illustrate the conditions. Housing is becoming more unattainable; homes are purchased by what the person can afford to pay per month. Severe inflation rewards speculators and penalizes savers. The squalor found among the countless millions living on the streets and in shanty towns in such cities as Calcutta, Hong Kong, Mexico City, Rio de Janeiro, and Lima intensifies the problems. Vast sums are now being spent on pollution control.

Yet greed continues to threaten life support. The twelve countries developing the future of Antarctica, with its tremendous potential to help save the world--its essential life balances, its oil and gas resources, potential coal and minerals, fish, seals, and icebergs for possible fresh water supplies--are continuing to look at the antarctic resources as another continent to exploit. The vulnerability of the world is exposed, but most people refuse to heed the message. Exploitation for profit remains the prime concern of the industrial nations currently controlling the freezing water mass.

The impact of these messages for teachers, working day by day with their students, provides an exceptional opportunity to help preserve the global ecological equilibrium. Students, as people, need the courage to help defer resource exploitation until the real priorities of society can be assessed.

The factors leading to a new society, and to the elimination of current schooling approaches, should be further examined. Educational leaders can make a significant difference. They have an obligation to help the people of the world in general, and those in their local communities in particular, to chart a new course toward a preferable and sustainable society.